

Dirty Linen classics

FREE REED REVIVAL RE-MASTERS

by Steve Winick

The Free Reed label was first known as a specialty record label for concertina fans. By the mid-70s, it changed into a small, general folk label, releasing excellent LPs by the folk scene's finest. It folded in 1978 and was revived in the mid-90s, reissuing a few select albums on CD. As the 90s became the noughties, Free Reed changed again, becoming the premiere label for high-end folk box sets, known as Revival Masters. Now they've come full circle with the Revival Re-Masters series, releasing their entire original vinyl catalog on CD, with bonus tracks wherever possible. This article looks at only a few of the 18 CDs in the Revival Re-Masters series.

Before there was a Free Reed label, there was *Free Reed* magazine. Founded by Neil Wayne as a small fanzine for concertina enthusiasts, it became a well-known source of squeezebox information, and Wayne became a familiar figure in folk music circles. In 1973, when Wayne decided to go to Ireland and collect concertina music on tape, Topic Records offered to release the results, and the Topic/Free Reed label was born. These Irish recordings have been reissued by Free Reed as *The Clare Set*, but the one non-Irish rarity from the Topic/Free Reed catalog is also in this series: Alistair Anderson's *Concertina Workshop*. The original idea was ingenious: an album of music for the English system concertina, which came with an instruction book and notation for all the tunes so that it also taught you how to play the instrument. In the digital age, of course, it's easier for them to put the book online. Thus, the booklet of notes with the CD reissue of *Concertina Workshop* [Free Reed FRRR 15] tells us that the disc contains links to the online book. Except that mine doesn't, and I couldn't find the book online by searching the web, either. I suspect it's just delayed, and that the label will eventually add it to its website. Still, I couldn't help thinking that, since the CD is rather short (36 minutes), it's pretty likely a hi-resolution .pdf of the book would have fit right onto the disc, along with the

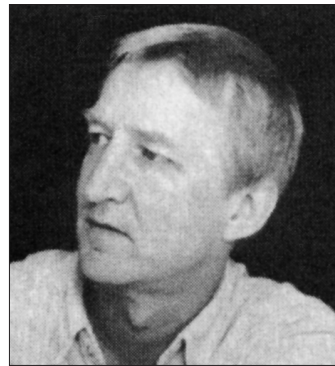
music! Whatever the case, the disc is excellent. English concertina has a flowing, legato quality that makes it an easy instrument to listen to. Anderson, who was then a member of the influential Northumbrian folk band the High Level Ranters, was in a position to absorb tunes from across the spectrum of Irish, Scottish, and English tradition. He was a master of many jaunty hornpipes, reels, and jigs, with titles like "The Malt Man Comes on Monday," "The One-Horned Sheep," and "The Dancing Tailor." Guitar and banjo are added by Boys of the Lough members Dave and Tich Richardson, and singer Graham Pirt guests on two songs. The result is an eminently listenable (if brief) CD.

In 1975, Free Reed separated itself from Topic, becoming a label of its own. Among the new company's earliest releases were two records of singing from Northern Ireland source singers: Eddie Butcher's *I Once Was a Daysman* and Joe Holmes and Len Graham's *Chaste Muses, Bards and Sages*. Recorded at the same set of sessions, in fieldwork conditions, at Butcher's home in County Derry, the two LPs made a natural set, and Free Reed managed to fit them onto one CD [Free Reed FRRR 08]. Butcher's songs range from the morose to the humorous, and on to the pugnacious. They include "Let Them Come to Ireland" (better known as "Do Me Justice"), a 19th-century protest against anti-Irish attitudes in England; "Coleraine Regatta," a funny account of a local sporting event; "Thousands Are Sailing," about the great waves of emigration that followed the famine in the 19th century; "Heather on the Moor," about meeting a pretty girl on a ramble; and "The Mountain Streams Where the Moorcocks Crow," about poaching and courting. These all became folk-revival standards (sung, respectively, by Len Graham, Paul Brady, Andy Irvine, June Tabor, and the Boys of the Lough), which shows how influential Butcher (and this LP) were. If you're a fan of traditional singing, you'll want to have this, and if you're just a fan of Irish folk, it's more than worth a listen to get a sense of the deep well from which the revivalists drew. Holmes and Graham, meanwhile, had a master-apprentice relationship in 1976; 32 years later Graham is quite rightly considered a master traditional singer himself, and he has also performed in revivalist contexts, such as the band

SHAKING OUT...

Skylark. *Chaste Muses* gives us a rare glimpse of duo singing in traditional Irish music, with the two singers teaming up on songs and lirls such as "True Lover John," "Merrily Kiss the Quaker," and "Green Fields of Amerikay." There are also solos from both singers, giving you the virtue of Holmes' unparalleled repertoire, and an early glimpse of Graham's great talent. The two albums together are a banquet of unaccompanied traditional singing.

Another of Free Reed's LPs, licensed from the nascent Green Linnet label in America, featured singer and concertina player Peter Bellamy performing the barrack-room ballads of Rudyard Kipling. One of the earliest Revival Masters boxes was a three-disc set of Bellamy material, *Wake the Vaulted Echoes*. However, the Leader archive has



Peter Bellamy

recently denied Free Reed the right to continue licensing several tracks of that set, so it can't be reprinted. Therefore, for Revival Re-Masters, Free Reed chose to create a new Peter Bellamy CD, taking five cuts from its previous set, and the rest from other labels and from Nigel Schofield's archive. The result is *The Ballads of Peter Bellamy, Big, Broadside & Barrack Room* [Free Reed FRRR 16]. It's a great showcase for Bellamy's trademark: belting out songs in a nasal voice with a wide vibrato (he pointed out that his name was an anagram of "Elmer P. Bleaty"), accompanied by his Anglo concertina. Standout songs include "Cholera Camp," Kipling's blackest comedy; "The Black and Bitter Night," centerpiece of Bellamy's ballad opera "The Transports"; and "Tyme of Harrow," cream of the "goodnight ballads." Perhaps the most poignant is "The Old Songs," a

piece Bellamy wrote based on a poem by the late traditional singer Bob Copper, which includes the current lineup of Copper family on backing vocals. Most remarkable of all is Bellamy's chilling rendition of "Fair Annie," Child ballad #162, in which a cruel lord forces his first wife to pretend she is merely a servant, so that he can bring a new wife home (much hilarity ensues). This CD is highly recommended for Bellamy's striking way with a song.

One of Free Reed's flagship acts as a vinyl label was the Old Swan Band, whose musicians Wayne remembers as "superstars of the dance scene." Back in the 1990s, the label reissued a single-CD compilation of this group as one of its first digital experiments. Now it's gone further and released each of Old Swan's Free Reed LPs on an individual CD. The band was formed in the mid-1970s by regulars at the Old Swan Pub, former members of the group Oak, members of the Old Spot Morris, and other folk hooligans. The band was known for refusing to play Irish or Scottish music and for playing at traditional speeds, slower than the breakneck pace in vogue among dance bands at the time. They concentrated on English country music, that honest, stick-to-your-ribs dance music of southern England, sometimes known as "umpty-ump." Hence the title of *No Reels*, their debut album from 1977, now reissued on CD [Free Reed FRRR 05]. In fact, the band's general slowness is combined with a penchant for playing "behind the beat," which creates a gentle, loping rhythm. This first reissue shows it to be kind of a wall-of-sound dance band with hearty free reeds (melodeon, harmonica, and concertina) leading most of the tunes, fiddle and whistle playing along, banjos, autoharps and mandolins adding color, and bass drums and triangles keeping the beat. The sound is actually remarkably good, which is a testament to engineer Nic Kinsey; each instrument is discernable despite the simple setup of six musicians live in the studio in front of crossed mics. All the playing is solid and strong, and the marvelous tunes are mostly pieces learned from such older musicians as Walter Bulwer and Scan Tester, making the album a treasure trove for tune seekers. *No*

THE SHEETS

Reels lopes amiably from start to finish like a nice pub session. The only thing one can complain about is the sameness of all the arrangements, with everyone on melody, more or less in unison, and the rhythm section keeping time.

Old Swan rectified this to a certain extent on its second album, *Old Swan Brand* [Free Reed FRRR 14]. This album was recorded with more thought given to the opportunities afforded by the studio as opposed to the pub or the dancehall. One nice set begins with a waltz played solo on autoharp by Ron Field; he's joined on the second waltz first by Fi Fraser on fiddle and Jo Fraser on whistle, and eventually by the rest of the band (Rod Stradling on melodeon, Mel Dean on bass trombone, Martin Brinsford on harmonica, and Danny Stradling on bass drum). The use of solos and various small combinations of instruments goes a long way toward relieving the all-together-now flatness that sets in on *No Reels*. In fact, where that style does appear on this disc, as on the set beginning with the "Symondsburys Mummings' Tune," it feels as fresh and lively as the other tracks, showing that a change is as good as a rest! *Old Swan Brand* also features quite a bit of singing. The vocals are uncredited — it's not clear who sings what — but there are fine versions of "The King of the Gypsies," "Jack Tar on Shore," "April Morning," and several others. There's also a sentimental piece called "The Bunch of Violets," on which Danny Stradling's already shrill singing style is backed by whiny harmonica and tinkly hammered dulcimer — well, they *were* trying new things, after all. Still and all, a satisfying CD from an LP that was influential on both sides of the pond; American folk-rock band the New St. George, for example, learned one of its signature tunes from this record.

Close friends and compadres with the Old Swan Band in the 1970s was another ensemble similar in style and approach, which called itself Flowers and Frolics. An eccentric lineup consisting of two melodeons, an anglo concertina, a banjo, a tuba, and a washboard, it recorded an album with an equally eccentric

name: *Bees on Horseback*. This opus is now reissued on CD [Free Reed FRRR 18], with no fewer than eight bonus tracks, for a whopping 75 minutes of music. Like *No Reels*, this one tends to bounce along from tune to tune sounding more or less homogeneous, and one could wish for less washboard. On the plus side is the band's sense of good fun, its accomplished playing, its repertoire of unusual tunes, and its equally unusual songs. The original album features music hall songs from Mike Bettison and guest vocalists Bob Davenport ("Mickey Mouse's Son and Daughter") and June Tabor ("Two Little Girls in Blue"). It also features some nice traditional songs, including one from Australia brought into the band by original frontman Graeme Smith, an Australian who had already returned to his native country by the time the band recorded *Bees on Horseback*. One fine thing about the bonus tracks is that they let us hear Smith with his bandmates on one track recorded in 1975, before his return to Australia, and another at a 2000 reunion. The sleeve notes consist of happy reminiscences of the band, plus a hilarious explanation of the album's title... which we won't spoil for you here.

It's hard to believe that 11 years have passed since Free Reed released Robin and Barry Dransfield's double-CD compilation, *Up to Now*. As I reported at the time in *Dirty Linen*, the original plan had been to reissue the duo's only Free Reed LP, *Popular to Contrary Belief*, on CD. But with surprising success in licensing extra tracks



Robin Dransfield

from all of the pair's previous solo and duo work, the label pursued an expanded project instead, which sadly left several tracks from the classic *Popular* still not reissued. The new CD reissue, *even more... Popular to Contrary Belief* [Free Reed FRRR 07], redresses that, presenting the whole LP plus seven bonus tracks. Of the songs not on *Up to Now*, the standouts are the brothers' take on the traditional songs "I Sowed Some Seeds," "Cold Blow and a Rainy Night," and "My Man John"; the third of these is particularly notable for not having been released on any previous Free Reed compilation. It's the familiar story of the man who courts his beloved by offering her material wealth instead of love, and his eventual redemption and success; it will be familiar to many in its children's form, "Paper of Pins." The brothers display their beautiful parallel singing on this superb, unaccompanied track. The rest of the album is a delightful set of songs and tunes from one of the best duos ever in the English folk revival. With simple but satisfying self-accompaniment on guitar, fiddle, dulcimer, banjo, and a few other stringed things, they sing in tight harmony, a sound they adapted from American bluegrass. Still, they allow their natural Yorkshire accents to shine through for a thoroughly English sound. From the rollicking whalermen's ditty "Talcahuano Girls" to the sublimely melodramatic ballad "Banks of the Sweet Dundee," and from the haunting ancient ballad of "Two Ravens" to the boisterous set of Morris tunes whimsically titled "Morris Ponk the Ticker Fixer," this album presents the best of English folk in one small package.

In addition to being the best of English folk, Barry Dransfield



Barry Dransfield

had made his mark in folk-rock on the classic 1972 album *Morris On*. Free Reed's late 1970s output also included another *Morris On* alumnus, John Kirkpatrick, who displayed his folk-rock chops on Free Reed's very last vinyl LP, 1978's *Going Spare*, now reissued on CD [Free Reed FRRR 10]. It was recorded just after the breakup of Steeleye Span, the most famous group ever to play predominantly traditional English folk music with rock 'n' roll instruments; Kirkpatrick had been a member for the last 18 months of the group's life. For *Going Spare*, he opted instead to record songs and tunes he'd written himself, fronted by his voice and accordian, and backed by a variety of folk and rock instruments. Inviting along a bunch of friends, including Steeleye's drummer Nigel Pegrum, singer and guitarist Bill Caddick, Old Swan Band members Fi Fraser and Martin Brinsford (the latter of whom would later also tour and record with Kirkpatrick in Brass Monkey), Colin and Stewart Goldring of the progressive rock band Gnidrolog, and oboe and hammered dulcimer player Sue Harris (who was his wife at the time), Kirkpatrick recorded a quirky masterpiece. Want a song about dog snot? J.K.'s got you covered. English seasonal songs about St. George and Father Christmas? Check. Cockney "dustman" ditties? They're here. How about a song that recounts what happens when a truck filled with "five hundred imperial gallons of best liquefied manure" trundles through an outdoor festival, unwittingly bestowing its brown bounty on all and sundry? Yes, that's here too, including the immortal line "You didn't just get sugar when they asked, 'One lump or two?'" Along with these diverse gems, Kirkpatrick offers some of his signature accordian tunes, including "The Gas Almost Works," "Rosy Cheeks and Purple Bloomers," and "Burning the Water." Two 1980 bonus tracks feature Richard Thompson, Simon Nicol, and Dave Mattacks, all at the time ex-members of Fairport Convention, backing Kirkpatrick on two of his children's songs. In all, it's an odd — and oddly rewarding — listen!

There it is, from Free Reed's prehistory to its final vinyl. But as I said, these eight CDs make up less than half of the full story. You can find out about the rest at the Free Reed website. [www.free-reed.co.uk]

